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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BRITISH HONDURAS (1851-1918)

No complete history of the church in British Honduras has yet been written. A short sketch, giving the main outlines of the interesting story of Catholic growth and progress in this British possession of Central America, from the coming of the missionaries down to 1893, was written and published by the present writer. Unfortunately only one copy is left; only fifty having been printed. This sketch, which has been used in the present article, was based upon documents left by Bishop di Pietro and upon material gathered in Honduras and elsewhere.

British Honduras is the only English dependency in Central America. It is bounded on the North by the Rio Hondo, which divides it from Yucatan; on the South by the River Sarstoon, which separates it from Guatemala; on the East by the Caribbean Sea, and on the West by the frontier which extends from the Rapids of Gracias-a-Dios on the Sarstoon through Garbutt's Falls on the Belize River, and thence due North to the Mexican border.

Belize, the capital of the Colony, was first settled by a group of English wood-cutters in 1662. Scattered as they were through the forests, these early colonists had little thought of building churches. They were almost all Protestants. It was only in 1812, when the city of Belize had been regularly laid out, that an Anglican Church was erected at government expense. In the year 1822, the Baptist Church was built; the Methodist Church in 1825; and in 1850, the Presbyterian Church. There were then very few Catholics in Belize; but in Mullens River, a village a few miles south of Belize, there was a small settlement of Catholic refugees from Spanish Honduras. These were ministered to by a Franciscan, Fray Antonio, who came there in 1832.

The little group of Catholics living in Belize had no church, no school and no permanent resident priest until 1851. In that year, the Very Reverend Benito Fernández, O. S. F., Vicar-Apostolic of Jamaica, sent two Jesuits, Fathers Dupont and Dupeyron, to take spiritual charge of the Catholic congregation.

The special need for their coming arose from events which had taken place some three years before in Yucatan. Exasperated by the misgovernment of their Spanish masters, the Indian popula-

tion had arisen in revolt, and with ruthless barbarity had massacred the greater number of the Spanish inhabitants of Bacalar and the adjoining district. Those who escaped became refugees on our northern frontier, where the main body eventually settled, and where they opened up what had hitherto been an uninhabited wilderness—save for the axe of the wood-cutter—into a number of flourishing ranchos and pueblos. Others again went farther into the interior of the colony, or domiciled themselves in Belize.

This new population was entirely Catholic; and it was on the representation of their need of pastors, that priests were sent from Jamaica to help them. In 1853, Father George Avvaro, S. J., came; he remained until the appointment of Father Salvatore di Pietro in 1872. Every two or three years, missionaries came to add to the number of the clergy or to supply the place of those who had died or had left the colony. Churches and schools were built. Residences were established in eight new centres, and small chapels, sixty in number, were built wherever a few Catholic families could be gathered together. Seventy years ago the Catholic Church was almost non-existent or unknown, but at the present time Catholics form three-fifths of the population, or about 25,000. They live chiefly in the northern part of the Vicariate and are mostly descendants of the Spanish settlers from Yucatan. In the south the Caribs live in the seaside towns of Punta Gorda, Seine Bight and Stann Creek, and in the interior there is a large proportion of native Indians whose families emigrated from Guatemala in order to settle in British Honduras.

The Vicariate has not only grown in numbers, but in efficiency and in ecclesiastical formation; it has gradually evolved from a struggling dependent church into a compact diocese. Until 1888, it was subject to the jurisdiction of the Vicars-Apostolic of Jamaica, who from time to time, visited this distant part of their Vicariate; but the difficulties of communication with Jamaica were so great that a decree of Propaganda, dated June 16th, 1888 (analogous to that of 1884, by which British Honduras was declared an independent Crown Colony), separated Honduras from the Jamaica Vicariate. The Superior of the Mission, Father di Pietro, a Sicilian Jesuit, was appointed Prefect-Apostolic. While gratefully acknowledging this favor, the leading Catholics of the colony asked His Holiness, Pope Leo XIII, on the occasion of his Epis-

copal Jubilee, to give them the further boon of having a bishop. Their request was granted, the priest of their choice was nominated Vicar-Apostolic of British Honduras and Bishop of Eurea, January 14, 1893, and on April 16 in the same year, the Right Rev. Salvatore di Pietro, S. J., was consecrated in Belize by the Right Rev. Bishop Becker of Savannah, assisted by the Bishops of Natchez and Mobile.

Much of the progress in the Mission both spiritual and temporal was due to Father di Pietro, and now that he had been made bishop, he increased his efforts for the good of his people. During the five years of his episcopate, he made annual visits to the residences and to the stations, preaching and confirming, besides collecting money to pay off the debts incurred by building churches and schools. In 1898, he twice essayed to make his customary visitations of the north of the Vicariate, but each time, he was forced to return to Belize owing to serious attacks of heart trouble. On August 6, 1898, his feast day, a deputation of gentlemen came to congratulate him; the next morning, he asked to receive Holy Communion and to be anointed. Then began a long agony lasting nearly two weeks; he died on August 23. His funeral was largely attended by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. With the permission of the Government, he was buried in the Cathedral. In Bishop di Pietro's last testament, he named as Pro-Vicar the Rev. Frederick Hopkins, S. J., to take charge of the Vicariate at his death until news of an appointment should come from Rome. The Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda confirmed the nomination, and gave the necessary episcopal faculties during the vacancy. On August 17, 1899, Father Hopkins was named by the Holy See, Vicar-Apostolic of British Honduras and titular Bishop of Athribis. He was consecrated in St. Louis, Missouri, November 5, 1899.

In December 1893, the Honduras Mission, which from the beginning had been attached to the English Province of the Society of Jesus, was transferred to the Fathers of the Missouri Province, who gradually replaced those from England. In April, 1899, Father William Wallace, S. J., was appointed Regular Superior and Pro-Vicar of the Bishop. He was followed by Father William Mitchell, S. J., in January, 1910, and in May, 1918, by Father John Neenan, S. J.

The progress of the Mission had had many checks and reverses in its formation. It had been established only a year, when in 1854, there came to Belize an epidemic of cholera, which in three months carried off a large number of Catholics, chiefly Italians, who had lately settled in the town. The zeal and edifying conduct of the priests in this calamity won for them universal respect and sympathy. This same year, Father Bertolio was sent to Corozal to open a second residence, but through the machinations of some excommunicated priests who had come from Yucatan, the missionary was forced to return to Belize. Later, repenting of their treatment of the priest who had been sent to them, the people of Corozal asked that another missionary might be allowed to come and dwell with them. Father Rossini went in 1858, but died after a year and a half, worn out by the many difficult journeys he had to endure. It was not until 1861, that the second residence of the Mission was established by Father Parchi. The troubles of Corozal were not yet over. An apostate Spaniard, turned Wesleyan, did much harm to souls by his preaching and distributing false Bibles and tracts. Knowing well the language of the Yucatecans and gifted with native eloquence, he deceived the simple people and led many to accept his teaching. The schism lasted for two years, but in the end the greater number came back, repentant to faith.

In July, 1856, the Mission in Belize met with a great reverse. Fire destroyed the northern end of the city of Belize, and the Fathers remained for nearly two years without residence, church, or school. A third residence, though hardly worthy of the name, was begun by Father Genon, S. J., in 1862, in Punta Gorda. This esteemed Belgian Father had the idea of uniting the widely scattered Carib population of the coasts of Spanish Honduras, Guatemala and British Honduras into one separate Mission, which should have its head-quarters in Punta Gorda. To forward this work he went to Belgium, put the matter before his countrymen, and came back with a small group of missionaries—three priests, a schoolmaster and a gardener. After a few months in Punta Gorda, one of the Fathers died, two returned to Belize, the gardener returned to Belgium. So ended the special mission for the Caribs; and when Father Joseph Woollett, S. J., Pro-Vicar-Apostolic of Jamaica, came to visit the Mission in 1871, the residence

of Punta Gorda was ordered closed on account of the extreme poverty of the congregation.

In 1862, Rev. Eugene Biffi, an Italian secular priest, (later Bishop of Carthagen), passed through Belize and seeing the difficulties the Fathers had in carrying on the Mission, offered himself as a helper. During the five years he spent in the Colony, he learnt the Maya (Indian) language, which gave him a great ascendancy over the Icaiche Indians. When these same Indians organized a raid into the Colony, he was sent by the Government to make a friendly settlement with them. To this priest and to Father Brindisi, we owe the beginning of a residence and church at Stann Creek, which were fully established in 1867.

In 1873, Father Avvaro, S.J., the first Superior of the Mission, died at Corozal. The people of Belize clamoured to have his remains brought to the capital, and permission was given to disinter the body and bring it to the city. On its arrival, the body was deposited in the church, and on the following day, there was a solemn Requiem Mass. In the funeral procession to the cemetery, the hearse was followed by the governor and by the chief citizens of the town, all wearing mourning to show their esteem and love for the deceased priest. After a few months, a handsome mortuary monument was raised to his memory at the cost of the inhabitants of Belize.

In 1874, Father John Pittar, the first English Superior of the Mission, came to British Honduras. His presence and the coming soon afterwards of other English Fathers, dispelled the foolish idea which some of the colonists held, that there were no English Catholic priests. Hence arose a custom of calling the Catholic Church, the *Spanish Church*. This year, however, was not without its reverses for the Mission. Father Antonio Ayerve had built a church at San Estevan and on the eve of Palm Sunday, when everything was ready for the opening, a fire broke out in a house adjacent to the church and in a few hours the building was entirely destroyed. Thus the good Father was left without a church and without resources. He was therefore obliged to return to the central residence at Corozal, where he died in June, 1874. Scarcely two months had passed, when yellow fever carried off two other Fathers in the same house. The new Superior, Father Pittar, recognized the sore straits in which the Fathers

were, and the need of funds to establish the Mission on a more solid basis. His appeals met with a generous response, and with the alms sent him, he was able to build a church and a house at Orange Walk. This new residence was placed under the charge of the indefatigable Father Parisi. Father Pittar likewise reopened the Residence of Punta Gorda and built there a more commodious church, which was again put under the care of Father Genon, who continued his labours among the Caribs until his death in 1878.

One of the great difficulties the Mission had to contend with, was to provide efficient teachers for its parochial schools. Belize Catholic school secured a good teacher in Brother Mark Quin, who came to the Mission in 1869, and continued to be its school-master until his death in 1879. His work was continued by his brother Richard. Meanwhile the school in Corozal, for want of an efficient master, had made but little progress, and many Catholic children had gone to the Methodist school, wherein some of them lost their faith. The coming of Father Henry Gillet in 1876, stopped this leakage, and so saved the Catholic youth of Corozal from a situation which might have been detrimental to their religion. Five residences had now been established under the care of eight Fathers: three in Belize, two in Corozal, and one in each of the residences of Orange Walk, Stann Creek and Punta Gorda.

A Catholic Association was formed in 1879, the chief purpose of which was to promote Catholic interests in the Mission. The principal gentlemen of the town of Belize became members and Mr. Henry Fowler, the Colonial Secretary, was chosen president.

With the coming of the new missionaries, the Mission flourished until 1881. A singular event took place that year, which caused some anxiety for a time. Father Henry Gillet, who had been teaching in the parochial school at Stann Creek, took advantage of the Easter vacation to pay a visit to the Izabal Lagoon. He had scarcely landed at Livingstone, when the telegraph notified Señor Rufino Barrios, President of Guatemala, of the arrival of the Jesuit Father, and asked for instructions. The next day, the priest was arrested and was taken under escort to Guatemala City, a journey of five days. As soon as he arrived, he was put into a dungeon used for those condemned to death, and

after two days without food, he was subjected to a strict interrogatory. Although the officials could find nothing against him he was transferred to the public prison of criminals, where he remained ten days, until he found the opportunity to communicate with the English Consul at Guatemala. The Consul sent his secretary to look into the case, and when he learnt what had taken place, he went in person to the president and asked for the priest's immediate release. On the following day Father Gillet was set at liberty, and conducted back to Izabal. Thence he returned to Belize.

One of the great difficulties in the way of spiritual progress in the Mission, is the language question. About three-fourths of the Catholic population are Spanish or Indian-speaking. Outside Belize and the two residences in the south, the language of the school is English and the language of the Church is Spanish, while the language of the home is either Spanish or Maya. The children in the school read English, though many do not understand it, but out of school, they speak another tongue. The missionaries, except two, are all English-speaking, so that they have to acquire two and sometimes three languages before they can be of efficient service in missionary work.

It was felt that the arrangement of having the Fathers teach in the elementary schools interfered seriously with other parish work. For many years the Superiors of the Mission had thought of sending for Sisters to undertake the education of the girls, but for want of money they could not carry out the wishes of the people of Belize. At last, however, Father di Pietro visited Europe to seek for missionaries and to collect money for the various works of the Mission. There he met the Reverend Mother of the Sisters of Mercy in New Orleans, and arranged with her to send, on his return to Belize, six Sisters of Mercy to teach the Belize schools. They came on January 20, 1883, and since that time they have worked faithfully and successfully, both in their Academy and in the Catholic Public Schools of Belize. The Belize Convent of Mercy received its subjects from the Mother-House in New Orleans. In August, 1900, the Sisters of Mercy opened another convent in Corozal; but after a year and a half this had to be closed, because the Mother-House was unable to send sufficient teachers for two convents. This same lack of subjects threat-

ened later the closure of the Belize Convent, but, on representation to the Holy See, this difficulty was overcome. Still no new teachers could be sent for the schools, and so in the course of time, it looked as though the convent would cease to exist. Under such circumstances, it was decided to make the Belize Convent an independent foundation. In 1914, those of the Sisters who elected to return to the Mother-House left for New Orleans, while the rest remained to carry on the work of teaching some five hundred children, with the assistance of postulants, who had come in answer to an advertisement in the *Messenger of the Sacred Heart*. Many applied; some came, some left; and with those who stayed there is now a Community of fifteen, two of whom are Lay Sisters.

At another residence, that of Orange Walk, a convent of the Sisters of the Third Order of Mount Carmel was begun. It lasted for about two years, but had to be closed on account of sickness among the Sisters. Nor was this the only misfortune which befell the Orange Walk Mission. At great personal sacrifice, giving much of their labor gratuitously, the people of the place had built a large church at the cost of five thousand dollars. In November, 1899, it was completely destroyed by fire, through the carelessness of an altar boy in the sacristy. This misfortune almost broke the heart of the Pastor, Father Piemonte, through whose exertions chiefly the church had been built. To console him, the people at once came forward and offered their labor and money to build a new stone church. In 1898, the Sisters of the Holy Family (colored) came to the Mission. They were put in charge of the Stann Creek Catholic School, where they still continue to do splendid work among the Carib population, both in school and parish.

Through the kindness of a benefactress, we were enabled to build a convent at Benque Viejo for four Sisters of the Congregation of Pious Missions. Since 1912, they have had charge of an Indian school, which has grown so steadily under their fostering care that we have had to build a much larger school to accommodate the school children. They have a roll of over two hundred pupils. Three more Sisters of the same Congregation are, since 1913, teaching a school with great success in Corozal. Thus has been solved the problems of procuring efficient teachers for our larger elementary schools.

Meanwhile, whilst we had been providing for our primary schools, there had been growing up among our people, and among good Catholics in the neighbouring republics, a desire to see established in Belize a school for boys and girls, giving a higher education. For this reason were founded in Belize: St. Catherine's Academy, which has now about one hundred and thirty pupils, twenty-five being boarders, and St. John's College, conducted by Jesuit Fathers. In 1917, the College registered one hundred and seventy-six students, of whom one hundred and five were boarders.

Both Academy and College began in a very humble way. A select school was started in the Belize presbytery with Father Cassian Gillet as the teacher. There were two boarders and twelve day-scholars. After a time the boarding school had to be given up, but the select day-school continued with varying fortune until 1895. Then, with fifty boys on the roll, a small building was begun at the back of the presbytery to accommodate the increasing numbers of students. The foundation-stone was laid by His Excellency, E. B. Sweet-Escott, C. M. G., the Acting Governor, and it was formally opened February 3, 1896. So began St. John Berchmans' College. It continued to grow and boarders from the republics of Central America came in such numbers that a new building to accommodate them had to be erected.

A site, fronting on the ocean, of twenty-five acres, was purchased from the Government, as the place for the new St. John's. There a handsome college has been built at an outlay of nearly one hundred thousand dollars. The main building is 262 feet long by 70 feet wide, the well-equipped gymnasium is 80 by 40 feet, whilst to the right of the main college building is the Fusz Memorial Chapel, attached to which is a spacious dining-room. The College more than meets the requirements of the Catholic youth of the colony; but the object in building it was likewise to give parents of the neighbouring republics the means of obtaining for their sons a solid intellectual and moral training without having to send them too far abroad. This object has to a great extent been realized, and the great body of students come from Guatemala, Honduras, San Salvador and Nicaragua, and a few from Mexico. These youths are being instructed and well founded in secular and religious knowledge, and it is confidently

hoped that, after their college course, they will exercise a beneficial influence in their respective countries.

Thus has this Mission of British Honduras grown in buildings, in numbers and in efficiency. But with the means to work, the fruit of the labors of the Missioners has, by God's grace, likewise increased.

The Vicariate of British Honduras is at present (1918) constituted as follows: there is one bishop, nineteen priests, four scholastics and four lay-brothers. All the priests are members of the Society of Jesus, except one. There are nine residences and over sixty outside stations. There is one college, one academy and thirty-six Catholic Public Schools. They are called Public Schools, because they accept the government standards for the lay branches of instruction, submit to inspection in these branches by the Inspector of Schools, and receive government grants-in-aid. There are four convents of religious women, all of whom teach in our elementary schools. The Sisters of Mercy came to Belize in 1883, the Sisters of the Holy Family to Stann Creek in 1898, the Sisters of the Pious Missions to Benque Viejo in 1912 and to Corozal in 1913.

Nor has the spiritual fruit of the work of the Missioners been behindhand. In the beginning of the Mission the few Fathers had to be content with baptizing, marrying and giving the sacraments without much instruction. There were no regular catechetical instructions, no properly constituted sodalities, and few Catholic schools. Comparing the work of the priests of 1882 with that of 1916, we see a marked progress. There were in 1882, nine priests, two lay-brothers, four residences, thirty-five stations, ten schools, eight hundred pupils, five hundred and forty-seven baptisms and seven converts. There are today thirty-six sodalities with one thousand six hundred and seventy-one members; the Apostleship of Prayer has five thousand one hundred and six associates, and there is now an estimated Catholic population of twenty-five thousand. The population of British Honduras has been of very slow growth, for there are no manufactories of any importance to attract laborers; and our young people, unless they become wood-cutters or Chicle bleeders, frequently leave to find work elsewhere.

The chief vices we have to contend with are drunkenness and

concubinage. These are difficult to eradicate. There is a constant influx of people from the neighboring republics. The people living near the borders of the colony and having no resident priests have grown up ignorant of their Catholic faith, and so readily fall into immorality. Their influence upon our native population is bad. As to the vice of drunkenness, hardly anything is done by the Government to put a stop to it, except the placing of a high duty on all alcoholic liquors.

As to the future of religion in British Honduras, the convents, with the religious as teachers in the schools, will have a salutary influence over women to make them respect the sanctity of marriage, and the sodalities with the increased frequentation of the sacraments will raise the moral tone among men. Still, with the present low standard of morality around them, there will be frequent lapses from virtue among the young, who begin well but oftentimes end badly.

The Vicariate is intimately connected with the Church of the United States inasmuch as it depends upon the Missouri Province of the Society of Jesus for its priests, while much of the progress made so far has been due to the unfailing generosity of charitable friends in North America.

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